Group pathology

We have conceptualized individual pathology as a process that is initiated by the way in which infants’ hatching or entering the linguistic dimension is usually dealt with in our culture, so cultural pathology has played a central role in creating individuals’ madness from the start. It seems impossible to think of a mad culture without thinking of it as made up of mad individuals. So individual madness has likewise played a central role in cultural madness from its start. As shown in Chapter 5, the two pathologies are two sides of a coin. Nevertheless, we saw that looking at individual pathology separately was useful, as long as we did not take it literally, as truly autonomous, and remembered to introduce cultural considerations when necessary. This chapter reverses the process. We will focus on cultural madness, and the same caveats apply. The problems raised by that concept are the mirror image of those raised by the idea of individual ‘mental disorders’.¹ We need to remember that there can be no autonomous, self-sufficient cultural pathology any more than there can be an autonomous individual pathology. We will criss-cross the field once again, adding considerations pertaining to individual pathology as needed.

Just as had been in the case of individual pathology, there does seem to be something to the idea of the pathology of an entire culture.² We have already caught a glimpse of one major apparently ubiquitous pseudo-independent cultural symptom when we considered pathology from the side of the individual: the way a mad culture engenders and sustains the radically distorting, estranging bifurcation put into play at the time of hatching, if not earlier.

At any rate, in spite of continuing criticism by many experts, the practice of personalizing or anthropomorphizing an entire culture,
society or subculture – that is, turning it into a sort of superperson – has been in popular favor for a long time. Groups characterize themselves as well as their ‘other’, their shadow, in this fashion. (The characterization of these ‘others’, the outsiders, are likely to be pejorative, racist, hostile.) These personalizations of groups do resonate with the public and even with some scholars. Nationalism, war, racism, discrimination, political parties and actions, team and school spirit, and the like greatly rely on such practices. In the present context an important consideration of the usefulness and credibility of such generalizing personalizations is the range of their application. That is, if we characterize a nation as, say, narcissistic, or authoritarian, or wasteful or dishonest, how many members of the group need to really be like that (‘all Xs are Ys’; all Cretans are liars) before it becomes reasonable to personalize it? I believe that in the usual case, when one makes general statements of this kind about a group or nation, realistically that percentage is not expected to be very high (though the prejudiced person is likely to insist that it is 100%); the realist would be surprised if the generalization holds for 50% of the population. I believe, however, that in the present case the percentage is significantly higher. I submit that my characterization of humanity as mad holds for a significant portion. That is, the normal madness that I am about to consider is almost omnipresent in Western and Westernized cultures, which are the cultures I am focusing on here, the cultures that have brought us to the brink of extinction.

Background

The concept of national character, the ascription of individuals’ characteristics to entire nations, became prominent during the second half of the nineteenth century, although it had already surfaced in the latter part of the previous century. The term ‘national character’ describes forms of collective self-perception, sensibility, and conduct which are shared by the individuals who inhabit a modern nation-state. It presupposes the existence of psychological and cultural homogeneity among citizens of each country, as well as the idea that each nation can be considered a collective individual, with characteristics analogous to the empirical individuals who are its inhabitants.

Representative examples of such questionable attributions of personality characteristics to an entire culture are ‘the crudely psychoanalytic